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Juggling Collections and Connections to Community: Changing Role of Libraries

Jorge A. Leon jr
Pittsburg State University, jleon@pittstate.edu

Barbara M. Pope
Pittsburg State University, bpope@pittstate.edu

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Juggling Collections and Connections to Community: Changing Role of Libraries

Abstract

The traditional role of the academic librarian has long been the support of the university's needs through instruction, collection development, and research assistance. Over the decades, this role has evolved to match the needs of the 21st century university. At Leonard H. Axe Library, the challenge has been to balance the print and electronic collections at a university whose programs do not draw enough on library resources while also creating meaningful connections with students and faculty. To increase collection relevancy and make meaningful connections, the library has been creating opportunities for patrons to be content-creators and to engage with library resources and services in new ways, with the benefit of empowering users to be invested in the future development of the library space. This approach allows us to share with the university community the wide variety of library resources and services that can be both informative and fun.

INTRODUCTION

There is no easier way to track how much the role of the academic library has changed over the last two or three decades than to observe how much job responsibilities have evolved over this same time period. Research on the topic shows varying opinions about how much of the changes are due to financial shifts, technological changes, decline in circulation, or larger changes in the structure of higher education. Shifting from the discussion of factors driving the changes, many libraries have struggled to determine their value on campus and how to reach out to new users that are increasingly technologically independent. This article presents ways in which the outreach efforts of Leonard H. Axe Library at Pittsburg State University have worked to bridge university users and library resources. Closely matching the university's strategic plan, the library developed goals and objectives aimed at engaging users, fostering users' sense of ownership over the library space, and eventually cultivating partnerships to sponsor and co-host events that took advantage of library resources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In her article, Denise Troll (2006) states that "Academic libraries are changing in response to changes in the learning and research environment and changes in the behavior of library users" (p.99). This strikes at the core of the academic library's role which is to support the needs of the university and its users. Thus, the academic library continues to change as the needs of the university change. One of the largest changes in higher education, and subsequently the library's role, has been the explosive impact that technology has had on classes, research, and all aspects of learning. In their conversation on merging librarian roles and emerging instructional technology, Bell and Shank (2004) argue that the all-encompassing reach of information technology in instruction, "has become widespread and continues to serve as an almost universal disruptive force at colleges and universities" (p.73). These articles demonstrate how extensive the power of emerging technology has been on librarian roles. These cumulative changes have led to what many describe as the decline in traditional roles and services of the academic library, affecting all areas, including circulation and reference. Author Lesley Moyo (2012) probably best describes this new age of researcher by saying, "Being able to conduct library research independently in a networked information environment is now as common as doing personal banking online or taking an online class" (p.31)." With the proliferation of technology and changes to the traditional library roles, it is no wonder that many academic libraries struggle to balance their collections, services, and user interactions. At Axe Library, we also struggled to balance an aging collection and to make meaningful connections with the university community. We developed a programmatic approach that focused on using outreach strategies to bridge users and collections.

EVOLVING LIBRARIAN ROLES

The modern day academic library looks very different than it did even 20 years ago. The traditional roles of the academic library have included information literacy, collection development, providing access to materials, creating research aids, providing reference assistance, and archives. Some of these roles have changed or are no longer done at some libraries, while new roles have been added to keep up with the impact of technology in higher education.

The roles of an academic library may now include information and metadata literacy, managing electronic resources, managing open education resources, distance learning and off-campus librarianship, outreach, coordinating maker spaces, and assessment. Many of these new roles are a direct response to new technologies and the challenges that accompany them. Academic libraries may now spend a significant portion of their budgets on electronic resources and for some libraries, they may be linked together through discovery services, full text access, and open url resolvers; something that was not possible 25 years ago.

In addition, librarians are further integrating themselves within the curriculum, whether through library instruction or being embedded into a class. Many schools now require library instruction as a component of the curriculum, either through a library science class or one shot library instruction sessions. Some libraries are partnered with services such as tutoring and writing centers. Many academic programs now face accreditation requirements that certain resources are available to support those programs. Some of these changes are due to demands from administration for the purposes and functions of the library.

LIBRARY CHALLENGES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Academic Libraries face a multitude of challenges this century, including a lack of space, budget problems, changes in check out patterns, and disconnects between users and resources. As the demand for more services and resources in the library grows, there is less space available for everything, including study space, collections, and group work space.

As anyone who has managed electronic resources knows, a flat budget means a loss every year due to the rise in material costs, hosting fees, and subscription costs. As this trend continues, budgets are exceeded and keeping resources long term becomes unsustainable. Every year, libraries gather their usage statistics and cost data to make determinations on what resources they must continue, what they must drop, and what they may add. In addition, the fact remains that students are more likely to use an open web resource before using our website. This is a user education issue in breaking down barriers and getting students acquainted with library resources. In recent years, Axe Library has seen

a decline in book check outs but an increase in checkout of videos and reserve items, as well as an increased use of some electronic resources.

THE STORY AT PITTSBURG STATE UNIVERSITY

In order to meet the challenge of connecting with patrons and being relevant in the 21st century, we began to explore other ways to make connections with patrons outside of traditional instruction and reference interactions.

It is difficult to sum up in a couple of sentences who our patrons are because we have a diverse range; however, a few characteristics stand out. There are many creative, artistic, and vocal students who are hungry for an opportunity to show off their work, express themselves, or articulate their student groups' position on some social, economic, or political issue. They are a blend of traditional, non-traditional, and late night studiers. They often come in prepared to hunker down and work for hours to survive a tough exam or write a paper. They also include distance learning students who take classes while working a full time job, and some support families. The distance learners often have the toughest time navigating library resources.

When we were presented with the need to change, our biggest challenges included out of date collection development policies and procedures, being at the planning stage of a multi-year renovation, and a reorganization of positions. We were hiring two completely new librarian positions and had lost three people.

DEVELOPING GOALS

In order to meet these challenges, we created goals from our latest strategic plan. Our goals were to develop new and innovative ways to make meaningful connections with users and capitalize on our users' expertise to create content that connected back to our resources. From our goals, we developed several objectives, which include empowering users to create content in the library, creating services and spaces that allow users greater ownership of the library, and supporting student and faculty programs that encourage use of library resources.

DEVELOPING USER CREATED CONTENT AND OWNERSHIP OF SPACE

Before discussing why library users may want to create content in the library, it is important to discuss what users get from using the library. For many librarians, the immediate answer is to use resources like books, journals, computing space, and attend instruction sessions. However, one must also consider the library as a place, a social location for users to go. Maxwell (2006) further builds on the theory of libraries serving the function of a Third Place, a concept that recognizes that users gravitate to a social place, not home or work, that allows informal gatherings (pp. 97-98). Working off of similar ideas, the focus at Axe Library has

been to help patrons cultivate within the library their own space, their own niche, and a sense of community.

One of the most remarkable ways we saw the willingness for users to help shape the space was through the data gathering stages of the renovation process. As has become common practice in libraries aiming to develop an information commons, Axe Library went through various phases of data gathering and user studies. Some of these phases took place outside the library, in cafeteria spaces, and in the library. Users provided information through surveys, looking through catalogs of images and selecting favorites, and even helped rate furniture. What was shocking was the degree to which users shared their study habits and their sense that they were helping shape the space. Participants shared details regarding the hours they studied, what types of spaces they favored, who was with them, and whether or not they would return to the library after going to get food.



Through partnerships, several opportunities arose to give students creative outlets at Axe Library. The library strategically partnered with art faculty and students to provide several opportunities for user created art in the library. Art students were eager to show off their creative work at the library. Displaying their art, as part of semester long displays, gave students a sense of pride and ownership over part of the library space. In one partnership with an art faculty member, the library served as a “client” providing students with a semester long assignment to create murals that decorate most of the first floor. The students presented a library committee with ideas, received feedback, and after several iterations, created four murals that encompassed their visions of what the library represented on campus. These murals embodied the artistic ability of students and forged a strong faculty partnership.



Another example of promoting ownership in the space came with the recent push to provide unmediated study spaces, work rooms, and classrooms to students. These spaces can be reserved online and available for use whenever students need them. While it takes time to teach the process, many students appreciate the flexibility and have really capitalized on using the spaces. Some student groups have started using the software to schedule meetings, and panhellenic groups have been scheduling study competitions each semester to complete their required study hours.

In addition to providing an opportunity to gather or study, the library can also give students a platform to express their ideas or their group's issues. Some student organizations have used display spaces to promote their organization or a social issue. An example of this is the sustainability student organization creating art displays from recycled metal, promoting Earth Day activities, and promoting library materials on recycling or green initiatives. Cases like this demonstrated students' willingness to shape the space by creating content that advocates their points of view while also utilizing and promoting library resources.



A crucial component of the plan was to promote the user events and programs to encourage additional users to use library resources. Despite our efforts to connect with students through the reference desk and library instruction, we know that some resources do not get used enough, or sometimes are not used effectively. This is where liaisons have helped spread the message to professors and academic departments. At Pittsburg State University, each librarian is a liaison to at least one academic department. Liaison roles vary depending on the department's needs, including collection development, library instruction, creating subject and course specific LibGuides, and being the main contact person. These partnerships are essential to helping develop a network of active partners. Partners inside the library, such as the Writing Center and Student Success, help spread our message to new and incoming students while being key partners at major events. Currently we hold annual resource fairs with both partners and help provide research sessions for their schedule of courses. They, in turn, refer students needing help with research to us.

ENCOURAGING RESOURCE USE

Our last goal focused on tying outreach efforts, promotion, and user created content into a cohesive plan to promote library resources. This element was as much an extension of partnership opportunities as it was enabling groups to create content in the library.

One of the biggest successes has been helping students to promote their club's agenda and in the process extensively use the resources and market the space. The student sustainability group has created several displays to promote recycling and Earth Day. As a part of their efforts, they researched what materials the library had, checked some out, and through their display encouraged others to also check them out. In a similar fashion, the English department and English honor society participated during the banned and challenged book events. Leading up to these events, the groups researched various topics, selected materials for readings, and had those items available for check out during their events. A few partnerships took this a step further and provided recommendations for library acquisition. Ahead of one event, that promoted gender pay equity, the student groups and academic departments requested print materials they wanted to use, read, and promote during the event.

On the topic of space use, similar effects were seen, where groups wanted to participate in the programming and put their own twist to it. Traditionally, the library has offered extended hours during dead week and finals week. The Outreach department started providing late night programming during those weeks, including offering food and drink to students. As programming evolved, student activity organizations became active in helping promote and support

efforts. Currently, Axe library organizes the overall event and the student organizations help provide supplies, work some of the evenings, and even help provide healthier snack choices. The partnership has allowed for additional food and drink and even the introduction of musical events for relaxation during late study hours.



CONCLUSIONS

The partnership efforts Axe Library has embarked on over the last few years have provided remarkable opportunities and will continue to evolve with time and as new groups become involved. By accepting the shifting nature of library roles and embracing partnerships, the library is positioned to provide a new set of services, spaces, and added value to the university community. While these are not traditional roles, fostering student and faculty partnerships and creating a sense of student ownership in the library will become an integral part of library services.

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